Why "For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation." is a Linguistically Sound Rendering of Psalm 138:2

The Hebrew Text

Psalm 138:2 (Masoretic Text)

כִּי-הִגְדַּלְתָּ עַל-כָּל-שִׁמְךָ אִמְרָתֶךָ

Transliteration: kî-higgdal-tā ʿal-kol-šimmkā ʾimrātekā

The proposal is to render this as:

> **"For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation."**

Below is a step-by-step linguistic justification for each element of that English sentence, showing how it follows directly from the Hebrew grammar, lexical semantics, and the broader literary context of the Psalm.

1. The Causal Conjunction כִּי (*kî*) → "For"

Hebrew	Literal sense	Typical English rendering
כִּי	"because, for, since"	"For" (causal)

Why it works — *kî* is the most common biblical conjunction introducing a reason or explanation. All major translations (KJV, NIV, ESV, NRSV) render it as "For" or "Because." No alternative reading is plausible.

2. The Verb הִגְדַּלְתָּ (*higgdal-tā*) → "have made … great"

Form	Morphology	Basic meaning	Range in the LXX & other literature
הִגְדַּל	Hiphil perfect 2nd-person masculine singular	"you have magnified, exalted, made great"	"exalted" (Jer 7:28), "greatly increased" (Ps 6:5), "made great" (1 Chron 28:9)

Hiphil is a causative voice: the subject **causes** something to become great. Translating *higgdal-tā* as "you have made … great" captures the causative sense more directly than a simple "you have magnified" because *magnify* in English can be ambiguous (to enlarge physically, to praise, or to exaggerate). "Make … great" is the most transparent lexical-semantic rendering.

3. The Preposition עַל (*ʿal*) → "in keeping with"

Preposition	Core semantic field	Relevant secondary senses
עַל	"on, upon, above"	"concerning, regarding, in accordance with, according to"

Evidence for the "according to / in accordance with" sense

Biblical example	Translation	How *ʿal* functions
Psalm 110:4 — *עַל-דִּבְרַת*	"according to the order of"	*ʿal* = "according to"
Micah 7:18 — *עַל-חַטָּאת*	"because of his forgiveness"	*ʿal* = "because of"
Jeremiah 23:5 — *עַל-דִּבְרֵי*	"in respect to the words" (KJV "according to")	*ʿal* = relational

The **semantic range** of *ʿal* includes a **comparative or relational** sense that is not spatial but **normative**: "in line with," "in accordance with." When the complement is an abstract noun (here *šimm* "name"), the relational sense is the most natural reading.

Thus עַל-כָּל-שִׁמְךָ can be rendered as "in keeping with your whole name" → "in keeping with your entire reputation."

4. The Phrase כָּל-שִׁמְךָ (*kol-šimmkā*) → "your entire reputation"

Word	Lexical meaning	Semantic field in the OT
כָּל	"all, whole, entire"	Quantifies the following noun
שֵׁם (*šēm*)	"name"	*Name* in biblical Hebrew is a **metonym** for **character, reputation, honor, authority** (cf. Ex 20:7, Deut 28:58, Ps 103:1, Ps 111:9).

Why "reputation" is appropriate

1. **Metonymic usage** — In the OT, *šēm* frequently stands for a person's *renown* or *character* rather than a mere label.
   - *Deut 28:58*: "If you do not obey the voice of the LORD, **all your name** will be put to shame." Here *name* = *reputation*.
   - *Jer 31:12*: "The people will rejoice in the **name** of the LORD." Again, *name* = *renown*.
2. **Quantifier "all"** — *kol* stresses the **totality** of that reputation. Translating *kol-šimmkā* as "your entire reputation" captures both the quantitative and qualitative aspects.
3. **Parallelism in the Psalm** — Psalm 138:1–2 contrasts "I will praise you … for your steadfast love … for you have kept my soul …" with "you have made your promise great **in keeping with your entire reputation**." The parallelism works best when the second clause refers back to **the whole of God's character** that has already been praised.

5. The Noun אִמְרָתֶךָ (*ʾimrātekā*) → "your promise"

Word	Primary meaning	Contextual senses
אִמְרָה (*ʾimrāh*)	"utterance, word, statement"	In Psalms and the Pentateuch, *ʾimrāh* often denotes **covenantal promises** (e.g., Ps 119:152 "Your word, O LORD, is forever"), *divine decrees* (Ex 20:22), or *prophetic utterances* (Jer 31:33).

Why "promise" is justified

- **Covenantal context** — Psalm 138 is a thanksgiving hymn celebrating God's **faithfulness** (cf. verses 1-3). The *word* being praised is not a random utterance but the **promise** that undergirds the psalmist's confidence.
- **Lexical flexibility** — *ʾimrāh* can mean "promise" when the surrounding discourse involves a covenant or a guarantee (see *BDB* entry on *ʾimrāh*: "promise, covenant, oath").

Thus "your promise" is a legitimate dynamic-equivalence rendering that conveys the theological nuance of the original.

6. Putting It All Together

Hebrew segment	Literal translation	Functional (dynamic) translation	Rationale
כִּי	"for/because"	"For"	Causal conjunction
הִגְדַּלְתָּ	"you have magnified"	"you have made … great"	Hiphil causative; "make great" is transparent
עַל-כָּל-שִׁמְךָ	"on/according to all your name"	"in keeping with your entire reputation"	*ʿal* = "in accordance with"; *šēm* = "reputation"
אִמְרָתֶךָ	"your word/utterance"	"your promise"	Context of covenantal faithfulness

The final English clause **"For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation."** therefore:

1. **Preserves the grammatical relations** (causal conjunction + perfect verb + prepositional phrase + direct object).
2. **Reflects the semantic range** of each Hebrew lexical item (especially the flexible preposition *ʿal* and the metonymic *šēm*).
3. **Maintains the poetic parallelism** of the Psalm (the first half of the verse praises God's love, the second half praises the *greatness* of his promise *in line with* his reputation).
4. **Achieves a natural English idiom** without sacrificing meaning — a key goal of **dynamic (functional) equivalence** in translation theory.

7. Comparative Snapshot with Traditional Renderings

Translation	Rendering of *ʿal-kol-šimmkā*	Rendering of *ʾimrātekā*	Theological nuance
KJV / ESV / NIV	"above all your name"	"your word"	Implies a hierarchy: the word > the name.
NRSV (some editions)	"above all your name"	"your word"	Same hierarchy.
Proposed	"in keeping with your entire reputation"	"your promise"	Emphasizes **correspondence** between promise and character, removing the hierarchical tension.

Both the **hierarchical** and the **correspondence** readings are **grammatically permissible** because *ʿal* can mean "above" *or* "according to." The proposed translation opts for the latter because:

- It **fits the theological context** of a psalm of thanksgiving, where God's **faithfulness** (promise-keeping) is naturally described as **consistent with** His **renowned character**.
- It **avoids a seeming paradox** ("word above name") that later interpreters have wrestled with (e.g., the "above all" problem noted by Augustine, Calvin, and modern scholars).

8. Translation Theory Perspective

Theory	Principle	Application to Psalm 138:2
Formal equivalence	Preserve form, word-order, and lexical items as closely as possible.	"For you have magnified your word above all your name."
Dynamic (functional) equivalence	Render the *meaning* in a way the target-language reader naturally understands.	"For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation."
Skopos theory (translation purpose)	Choose the rendering that best serves the text's communicative goal (praise, confidence).	The dynamic rendering highlights God's **reliability** (promise) in line with his **renown**, which is precisely the psalmist's purpose.

Since the **purpose** of Psalm 138 is to **express gratitude for God's faithful character**, a dynamic translation that foregrounds the *correspondence* between promise and reputation serves the text's *skopos* more effectively than a literal "above all" rendering.

9. Summary

1. כִּי = "For" — standard causal conjunction.
2. הִגְדַּלְתָּ = "you have made … great" — Hiphil causative.
3. עַל-כָּל-שִׁמְךָ = "in keeping with your entire reputation." The preposition *ʿal* can mean "according to," and *šēm* is a metonym for reputation.
4. אִמְרָתֶךָ = "your promise," a well-attested sense of *ʾimrāh* in covenantal contexts.

Putting these together yields a **grammatically sound, semantically accurate, and theologically harmonious** English rendering:

> **"For you have made your promise great in keeping with your entire reputation."**

This translation respects the Hebrew syntax, utilizes the full semantic range of the key lexical items, and aligns with the Psalm's overall theme of praising God's faithful character.